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Online Social Networking: From Local Experiences to Global Discourses

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Abstract

This paper is based on a comprehensive national survey about Danish teenagers' use of social network sites and explores the different experiences they have through the use of social networking technologies. Those experiences are analysed in relation to the often one-sided public discourses surrounding the subject.

Often, young people do not have a voice in the public debate on internet safety and online social networking, but – as the paper will demonstrate – that does not mean that they do not have an opinion. By examining the responses of 2400 Danish young people to an online open-ended questionnaire dealing with their experiences on social network sites, I demonstrate how young people relate not only to a local context, but also a broader societal level when addressing the issues of online behaviour. In the paper I analyse how young Danes between the age of 12 and 18 – through their statements and responses in the survey – construct themselves as users of social network sites both in relation to very concrete and local online experiences from their everyday life and in relation to a more intangible global level of mediated discourses. Subsequently, I analyse how they construct themselves as 'responsible young people' by distancing themselves from the public and "grown up" discourse represented by e.g. their parents, teachers or the media.

Finally, the paper argues that the one-sided articulation of the dangers and downsides of online social networking in the public debate overshadows the positive and social aspects of the everyday online experiences of young people. This leads them to a feeling of being alienated and not taken seriously as members of society.

Keywords: Online social networking, social network sites, young people, online experiences, identity construction, local and global discourses, survey.

Introduction

Online social networking has existed in a Danish context for quite some years. The biggest social network site today, Arto.dk¹, was also the first to launch in the country. It started out in 1998 and has had an increasing number of members throughout the years. Today, there are more than 800.000 profiles. It is estimated that 85% of all Danish teenager have a profile on the site and it is by far the most used website in Denmark, measured in page views.² The core users are between 12 and 18 years old, and they primarily use the site to communicate with their existing (offline) friends from school or their local environment. Secondly, they find new (online) friends with whom they, however, seldom meet face to face (Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2007a).

Arto can be divided into four overarching categories that cover different features on the site:

- The personal and branding related features (such as the profile, the picture gallery, the blog, the notice board etc.).
- The social and contact enabling features (such as the guest book, the debate forum, the clubs etc.).
- Entertainment (such as games, videos, jokes etc.).
- Support and practical information (such as rules, safety guidelines and support section) (Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2007a).

In this way, Arto is very similar to other popular social network sites such as MySpace³ or Bebo⁴. In particular, the features in the first two categories are popular, but it is interesting to see how features that would originally be perceived as personal or branding related, e.g. the profile text or the user name, are also used socially for friendship maintenance, or how social or contact enabling features, such as the guest book, are used by the users in order to profile or draw attention to themselves or to demonstrate how popular they are. For instance, it has become a common

¹ <http://www.arto.dk>. I choose to call Arto a 'social network site' in stead of 'social networking site', as it is mainly used for sustaining pre-existing relationships and, as boyd and Ellison (2007) notes, the term 'networking' implies meeting new people rather than maintaining ones existing social network.

² According to The Association of Danish Interactive Media (FDIM) Arto had 634.683.490 page views in May 2008. That is five times more than the following websites on the top list (http://www.fdim.dk/?pageid=84&list=site&sorttype=pageviews&dir=desc&usertype=total&periodtype=month&period=5-2008&s_publicment=1&s_users=1&s_visits=1&s_pageviews=1&s_cookies=1).

³ <http://www.myspace.com>.

⁴ <http://www.bebo.com>.

practice among the users to delete all the less interesting messages from their guest book and leave only the ones that contain flattering remarks from their best friends.

I have been following Arto as a researcher and an ethnographer for the past four years and my research (e.g. Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2007a; Larsen, 2007b) has shown that the youngsters use Arto to maintain and confirm their IRL-friendships. They do so by constantly reminding each other that they are best friends, love each other, mean the world to each other etc. Their language online is characterised by a very distinct discourse of love, and these constant acknowledgements are quite important to the young people; it is important for them to be constantly assured that they look good and that others like them. This is part of their identity construction as young people and this is why online social networking is so important to them. In that sense Arto functions as a forum for reassurance and affirmative messages between the youngsters (Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2007a; Larsen, 2007b).

Furthermore, my previous studies of Arto have demonstrated that the majority of users do not distinguish between online and offline and do not have another personality online. In order to be recognised and acknowledged by their friends they have to be themselves. Instead of pretending to be someone else or trying out different identities it is much more interesting for the youngsters on Arto to be accepted as who they are. Therefore the website is a continuation of their offline life. Actually, it is exactly this combination of online and offline that makes Arto so popular. This can be seen in both the online communication, which is often about something going on offline, and in the heavy focus on maintaining the IRL-friendships (Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2007a; Larsen, 2007b).

My research has also shown that Arto has opened up an alternative space for young people's identity construction. The users' construction of identity on Arto is heavily relational and interwoven with their friendships. Their construction of identity often goes through their friends and there is both an element of self-construction as well as a strong element of co-construction, which the youngsters encourage themselves. Here they rely on a commonly shared understanding that they must speak highly positive of each other. In a way the users are actually in control of other's construction of them to the degree that they can be almost certain that the description will be a positive one. Thus, the users are continuously constructing and co-constructing their identity online – not only by using the site and its functionalities, but also by using their friends as mediational means (Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2007a).

The social and individual aspects of Arto have been rather under-represented in the otherwise intense media coverage of the site. When it comes to moral panics, Arto has had a similar history as MySpace in the United States (Marwick, 2008). During the past four years the site has been heavily represented in the news media in stories about predators, paedophiles, online bullying or harassment (Larsen, 2006). This has resulted in an intense public debate and in different (sometimes political) initiatives. The focal point is often that online social networking is dangerous and it is discussed what technical precautions can be taken or how we can legally regulate or prevent these things from happening. As Marwick notes in regard to MySpace, *"breathless negative coverage of technology frightens parents, prevents teenagers from learning responsible use, and fuels panics, resulting in misguided or unconstitutional legislation"* (Marwick, 2008). This seems to be the case with Arto in Denmark as well. The one-sided media coverage has let parents, teachers and politicians to claim that the site should be closed down. Many Danish schools have blocked the site and a lot of parents have banned their children from using the site and forced them to delete their profiles instead of teaching them responsible online behaviour. The problem is that the way in which the news media represent young people's online activities paints a one-sided picture of the practices on social network sites. This is due to single events or cases of e.g. bullying or sexual harassment being represented as a general practice, and, as Dronter notes, people tend to disregard the fact the media usage of most children and young people is part of an everyday practice characterised by diversity, not one-sidedness (Dronter, 1999).

In the ongoing public debate on online social networking no one seems to be asking the young users how *they* experience what they encounter online. The idea behind this paper is therefore to focus on how young Danes feel about the different experiences, good as well as bad, that they have on their favourite social network sites.

Theoretical background

In the paper I argue that the moral panic and the news stories about Arto can be considered "global discourses", whereas the everyday life on Arto and other social network sites are "local experiences". In order to make this distinction, I draw on Ron Scollon's framework of Geographies of Discourse (Scollon, 2007). Here, the term 'discourse' is divided into "the local" and "the global". "Local discourses" are seen as our daily lives and moment-by-moment real-time activities or practices, whereas "global discourses" represent mediated or public discourses which give us news about actions, activities or things which have happened, or which we are worried about, but are distant from our daily lives (Scollon, 2007). The framework is developed for analysing the ways

in which people and objects at the local level of individual or personal human action are connected to more global issues. Thus, “the local” works at a level of human actions and objects within places, which are defined by very different discourses, whereas “the global” consists in discourse-geographies of human action (Scollon, 2007), e.g. in the news media.

The goal of the framework is to analyse how concrete local discourses are related to global discourses. One example that Scollon uses himself is hearing an explosion from your office window and then reading about it in the newspaper the next day (Scollon, 2007). Equally, we can think about how young people’s actions on social network sites are inscribed in more overarching global discourses represented by the news media. One concrete example is from a national newspaper article where a 14-year old Arto user with the profile name “Wildcat’”, was portrayed:



[Figure 1: Screenshot from the online version of the Danish newspaper 'Nyhedsavisen', January 15th 2007. The article is entitled "Young girls strip naked" and the pictures are taken from Arto.]

The article reads: “She calls herself Wildcat’ and she looks like one. Pouting mouth and tight-fitting sweater that barely hides her big breasts. 20 years old? 25 years old? One of the innumerable porn sites on the internet? No, Wildcat’ is 14 years old, she is Danish – and she entices on Arto, the most popular social

network site for thousands of young people. More than half a million have a 'profile' on Arto." (my translation).

Here, we see a good example of how a local action becomes part of a global discourse. The profile and the pictures that this girl had uploaded in a local context for her friends to see were suddenly part of a news story about how young girls strip naked and entice older men online. When I read the article I immediately found Wildcat's profile on Arto and to me she looked like a normal 14 year old girl communicating with her friends on Arto. However, in the newspaper article Wildcat' became a representative of a whole group of young girls behaving badly online.⁵

My goal of using the framework of Geographies of Discourse is to capture how there, in cases like this, is a direct link between local and global discourses, when it comes to young people's use of social network sites. In the paper, the "local discourses" cover the many different and concrete experiences of Danish teenagers on social network sites, and the "global discourses" are seen as the ongoing public debate dealing with these experiences as a whole and the news media's stories about young people's use of social network sites in general. Thus, by using the framework I will be able to trace some of the routes between what I call the "local experiences" and the more global and mediated public discourses.

The survey

The online survey, which the paper emanates from, was conducted in 2007 in collaboration with The Danish Media Council for Children and Young People⁶. It consisted of an online questionnaire with primarily open-ended questions. Rather than collecting statistic material, the purpose of the questionnaire was to gain an insight into and provide an overview of the different experiences that young people between 12 and 18 years old have on social network sites. This age group was chosen, as studies have shown that Danish young people especially start using the internet for online social networking, chatting and communication with their friends from the age of 12

⁵ This is not the only time that specific user names of profile owners have been published in the Danish news media in relation to stories about young people's online behaviour. Interestingly in this case, a user named Wildcat' commented on the article on the newspaper's website stating that she did not behave as it was stated in the article. Also, friends of the girl with the profile name Wildcat' commented on the article backing up the fact that she was not undressing in front of the camera and trying to entice older men. Of course, it is difficult to say whether these persons were in fact Wildcat' and her friends.

⁶ <http://www.medieraadet.dk>. The Danish Media Council for Children and Young People is appointed national Awareness Node under the European network Insafe (<http://www.saferinternet.org>). Insafe is a network of national nodes that coordinate internet safety awareness in Europe. The network is set up and co-funded within the framework of the European Commission's Safer Internet plus Programme (http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/index_en.htm).

(Eurobarometer, 2007; Rattleff and Tønnesen, 2007) . Also, many of the popular social network sites in Denmark, like Arto, have an age limit of minimum 12 years old.

The questionnaire contained 18 questions divided into three sections: “About you”, “What do you think?” and “What do your parents think?” The first section, “About you” consisted of a few factual questions and quantitative categories about media habits and use. The second section, “What do you think?”, contained a number of open-ended questions to which the respondents could answer qualitatively. The questions here focused in particular on what the respondents experience and think about their use of social network sites. In many of the questions the respondents were asked to give examples from their profile, e.g. messages from their guest book or comments from their picture gallery, and afterwards they were asked to reflect upon them. In the third section, “What do your parents think?”, were a few predominantly quantitative questions about the respondents’ parents’ views on and knowledge about their children’s online habits. On the last page of the questionnaire there was a box in which the respondents could write further comments.

The image shows three screenshots of an online questionnaire titled "MEDIERÅDET FOR BØRN OG UNGE".

Section 1: Om dig...

1) Hvor gammel er du?

- ☐ 11 år eller derunder
- ☐ 12 år
- ☐ 13 år
- ☐ 14 år
- ☐ 15 år
- ☐ 16 år
- ☐ 17 år
- ☐ 18 år
- ☐ 19 år eller derover

2) Hvad er dit køn?

- ☐ Dreng
- ☐ Pige

Progress bar: 33% (Forrige, Næste)

Section 2: Hvad synes du?

I denne del af spørgeskemaet vil vi bede dig give nogle eksempler på beskeder, du har modtaget på din profil. Vi vil gerne vide, hvad du synes om dem.

Progress bar: 66% (Forrige, Næste)

Section 3: Hvad synes dine forældre?

14) Ved dine forældre, at du bruger chatportaler, communities eller mødesteder på nettet?

- ☐ Ja
- ☐ Nej
- ☐ Det ved jeg ikke

Progress bar: 100% (Forrige, Næste)

[Figure 2: Screen shots of the three sections of the online questionnaire.]

2400 youngsters between the age of 12 and 18 years old answered the questionnaire with personal views on and examples from their online experiences. An equal amount of boys and girls participated in the survey, which was launched at ‘Safer Internet day 2007’⁷ and has been available on a number of popular Danish social network sites for children and young people, including websites for libraries and public institutions.

⁷ <http://www.saferinternet.org/ww/en/pub/insafe/mediaroom/sid2007.htm>

In the survey 88,3 % of the respondents state that they use social network sites on the internet.⁸ The term 'social network site' was not explained or defined in the questionnaire so the respondents answered the question from their own perspective on what constitutes a social network site.⁹ Some of them consider MSN Messenger to be a social network site as well. Among the sites they stated to use most often were first and foremost Arto and subsequently other sites such as NationX¹⁰, MySpace, Jubii¹¹ and Habbo¹². When asked about why they use these sites the majority of the respondents state that they do so in order to communicate and keep in contact with their friends. Generally, their answers point to the fact that they use the digital space as a continuation of their physical settings. The study then confirms what other studies (e.g. Larsen, 2005; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield, 2006; boyd, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007) have already shown; that online social networking is most often used by youth to sustain existing, offline relationships.

The respondents generally stated that they spend a lot of time on their favourite social network sites. Most of them reported that they spend more than 2 hours a day on social network sites:

Seldom	2,0 %
Once a week	2,7 %
2-3 times a week	9,7 %
Less than an hour a day	16,8 %
1-2 hours a day	29,5 %
More than 2 hours a day	30,9 %
Other	8,5 %

[Figure 3: Respondents' answers to the question: "How often do you use communities or social network sites?"]

However, these are not average numbers for all Danish teenagers, but reflect the amount of time that *users of social network site between the age of 12 and 18 state that they spend on the sites that they themselves consider to be social network sites*. In the category "Other" some wrote that they use social network sites "All the time" or informed that they spend up to four, five or even ten hours a day on social network sites.

⁸ However, this figure should not be confused with the average number of Danish children and young people between 12 and 18 who use social network sites, as the questionnaire was linked to from different Danish social network sites and therefore might have an overrepresentation of actual users. The figure of 88,3 % could therefore be higher than the average amount of users in Denmark within this age group.

⁹ However, we used three different words in Danish to cover the term: 'chatportaler', 'communities' and 'social network site'.

¹⁰ <http://www.nationx.dk>.

¹¹ <http://www.jubii.dk>.

¹² <http://www.habbo.dk>.

The following analysis will especially take its point of departure in the qualitative questions from the second section, "What do you think?", where the respondents were asked to write about and give examples of their online experiences. Also, I will include comments from the "further comments" box of the questionnaire because many of the respondents used this option to express their views on internet safety, press coverage and adults' opinions on their use of social network sites, but also they commented on the questionnaire itself and how their answers should be analysed. These comments are interesting to include when analysing the movements between local experiences and global discourses, because, as the analysis will show, the respondents also referred to more global discourses when answering the questionnaire and explaining about their own thoughts and local experiences in social networked environments.

Good and bad online experiences

In the questionnaire we asked the respondents about both positive and negative experiences they have had online. We did not define what "a good" or "a bad" experience is, as we wanted the respondents' take on it. Generally, there is a strong consensus among the respondents about what constitutes a good experience. When asked to write about a positive experience, their stories particularly related to maintaining contact with existing friends or finding new friends or boyfriends/girlfriends. The following are examples of the most common answers to the question "Tell us about a good experience you have had online":

1. *"I got a net-friend from Copenhagen and we write together, but we have no plans for meeting up."*
(Girl, 12 years old)
2. *"I have had many, thanks to the internet I have gotten a number of new friends. I have also gotten a better relationship with the friends I had before."* (Boy, 15 years old)
3. *"Some people at Habbo, with whom I had talked for a loong time, held a surprise party for me...I was totally surprised by all the things they did for me :-) A really a good experience..."* (Boy, 13 years old)
4. *When I was about to start boarding school, I wrote in the microphone at NX and asked if anyone else were about to start at this school, and in this way I started to write with some of the people I was supposed to go to boarding school with. I have also written with many people from my local area, who I have then met at for examples parties and then I have started to know them better ..*
(Girl, 15 years old)

5. *"It was when I meet my present ex-girlfriend. We both played handball, then I saw her at a tournament in Italy, but I did not dare to go and talk to her, so I wrote to her on Arto when we returned back home."* (Boy, 14 years old)
6. *"It is always a good experience when I write with my friends. I can not find exactly one, as there are many. I always get happy when I write with my friends."* (Girl, 13 years old)
7. *"The day I wrote 'Hi' to my now beloved Liv :-)"* (MCL: Liv = name of girl) *That turned out to be the best thing I have ever done in my life. :)"* (Boy, 17 years old)
8. *"A lot of the people we surround ourselves with in everyday life, we don't really get to talk to. So if you find them at Arto, you can leave a message saying "Hi sweetie, what's up?" And in this way you can strengthen the contact with other people."* (Girl, 16 years old)
9. *"But there are TONS! :D the trick is just to remember them :) when I created a homepage and all my friends used it for something sensible :)"* (Boy, 16 years old)
10. *"Once I wrote with this guy online (chat forum) when I was 14-15 years old.. (18 now) and it almost developed into some kind of flirt. But we only wrote together in there. We had no other contact."* (Girl, 18 years old)

[Examples of answers to the question "Tell us about a good experience you have had online."]

As can be seen from the extract above, the positive experiences revolve around local experiences and moment-by-moment activities from everyday life. Some of the respondents found it difficult to only name *one* good experience, as they generally experience many good things online, as the girl in example 6 and the boy in example 9 also point out.

Overall, when looking at the different statements from the respondents about what they consider to be positive online experiences, it becomes clear that their experiences can be divided into four overarching categories:

- Staying in touch with friends
- Meeting old friends or acquaintance
- Finding new friends or boyfriends/girlfriends
- Receiving sweet messages and comments from friends

The fact that it is important for the respondents to receive sweet messages and comments from their friends also becomes clear in the answers from one of the other questions asked in the questionnaire. Here, we asked to respondents to give an example of a message they had received

in their guestbook that they were pleased with. Here, the message "I love you" is clearly the mostly referred to example. This supports the observation that there is a distinct love discourse between teenagers on social network sites (Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2007a; Larsen, 2007b). Also, messages stating that the user is missed, or what the user means to someone else, are among the most common messages which the respondents are happy to receive in their profiles:

1. *"I love you, and I miss you so much, you are my best friend"* (From 16 year old girl's guest book)
2. *"Fuck mann ! .. The police just visited me ?! .. They said that they were looking for someone : - A Cute - Beautiful - Hot - Fantastic - Loved - Wonderful and lovely person .. -If they come back , I'll have to tell them where you are ? (:"* (From 13 year old boy's guest book)
3. *"HI SWEETY I LOVE YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT YOU"* (From 12 year old girl's guestbook)
4. *"You are simply one of the happiest and nicest people I know.* (From 17 year old boy's guest book)
5. *"I Love you my best friend !"* (From 12 year old boy's guest book)

[Examples of answers to the question *"Give an example of a message you have received that you were pleased with"*.]

There does not seem to be any sex or age difference related to the answers from this question. All the respondents seem to agree that messages similar to the above-mentioned are among the best messages they have received.

As a follow up question we asked the respondents if the message in question came from 1) someone unknown, 2) their best friend, 3) their boyfriend or girlfriend or 4) someone else who the user knows. Not surprisingly, only in 5,2 % of the cases the nice message was from someone unknown to the user. In 47,8 % of the cases the message was sent from their best friend, in 23,8 % it was sent from a girl- or boyfriend or, as in 23,1 % of the cases, by someone else familiar to the user. In this way, the good messages are primarily related to the users' IRL-friends and their physical environment and everyday setting – and more often it is a best friend rather than a boy- or girlfriend who sends the message. This also supports my previous observations on Arto; that the love discourse is equally strong between boys as it is between girls. Saying "I love you" in each other's guest books is not gender related, but rather part of a normal teenage practice where best friends are expected to express their feelings in this way. When explaining why those specific messages are nice to receive the respondents (both male and female) draw attention to the fact that

it means a lot to them to receive these kinds of positive messages and that it makes them feel valued by their friends.

In almost all the examples provided by the respondents dealing with positive experiences or messages, they have to do with their friends, and the study then confirms the fact that the biggest attraction of online social networking is the social element, and this is what motivates young people to use different social network sites.

On the other hand, when looking at bad online experiences or messages, the results are not that clear-cut. First and foremost, 57,1 % of the respondents state that they have never experienced anything unpleasant online. 31,5 % expressed that they have had unpleasant experiences, while 11,4 % answered "Do not know" to this question. Among the 31,5 %, who state that they have had unpleasant experiences, it is different what they consider to be unpleasant. The following are some of the most common examples given by those respondents who stated they have had unpleasant experiences:

1. *"Harassment, but I usually report it and/or block the user so that he will not have to possibility to write to me again."* (Boy, 12 years old)
2. *"Received threats from my x-boyfriend . , Showed it all to my mom and my big brother."* (Girl, 17 years old)
3. *"I recieved a virus :D so the next day I formatted."* (Boy, 15 years old)
4. *"Hmm.. That was when a guy who was 18 wanted to meet up with me. I kept on saying no, as I did not know the person."* (Girl, 12 years old)
5. *"A girlfriend had gotten hold of my code to Arto.dk, and then she changed my profile into a demeaning site (opposite to what I had written myself), and broke up with me. We had a hard time getting the profile blocked."* (Boy, 14 years old)
6. *"I have been bullied and smeared. I didn't do that much, I just ignored it."* (Girl, 16 years old)
7. *"There are many people on www.arto.dk who ask if you want to "cam" dirty. This bothers me a lot, as I am online in order to meet people I can have a nice time with, by writing together about interest etc."* (Girl, 17 years old)
8. *"Threats are always unpleasant, but mostly I have dealt with it calmly and as a joke."* (Boy, 18 years old)
9. *"Once I received a death threat from someone I didn't know on Habbo.dk. Habbo has these special people who get paid to help others, so I got hold of one of them. Among other things the person*

called me Jew swine, nigger, bastard and so on. All sort of bad words. And gay :S I don't understand why people can't write nice stuff to each other..." (Boy, 13 years old)

10. *"Some guys who write and ask you private questions, about sex and stuff like that. I block them and report them."* (Girl, 15 years old)

[Examples of answers to the question: *"If yes, what was it about (MCL: the bad experience) and what did you do about it?"*]

Being threatened or harassed seems to be among the most common bad online experiences, according to the respondents' answers. Also, some of the respondents consider viruses or spam in their guest books to be unpleasant. Looking at all the different answers, the negative experiences can be divided into the following four categories:

- Threats
- Harassment/bullying
- Virus/spam
- Sexual comments or invitations

Generally, many of the examples from the respondents are characterised by being isolated events, rather than something the respondents experience often. Also, the negative online experiences are not as "local" as the positive ones, meaning that the experiences are not necessarily connected to people from their local environment, but often strangers are to blame for what the respondents consider to be unpleasant online experiences. Thus, the negative experiences are not necessarily perceived as "local discourses" by the respondents, in the sense that they are not (normally) part of their moment-by-moment activities and daily lives, cf. Scollon's framework of Geographies of Discourse. Whereas the positive experiences are seen as being about them and the messages sent to them as individuals, the negative experiences are perceived as exceptions and interpreted at a more general level. They are connected to the fact that there are "idiots out there" and as a user of a social network site you will come into contact with them from time to time, but these negative experiences and comments sent by *"some guys"* do not necessarily have anything to do with the individual user.

Many of the respondents also draw attention to the fact that they know how to handle the occasional bad experiences, e.g. by blocking or reporting the users who harass them, like the respondents in example 1 and 10, by showing the messages to grown ups, like in example 2 and 9, or simple by ignoring it as stated in example 6 and 8.

The respondents were also asked to give examples of specific messages they had received which they did not like. Even though their examples are fairly different, their answers mostly concern sexual comments or invitations from strangers such as "Are you dirty?" or "Shall we chat/cam dirty?" Among other unpleasant messages the respondents mention threats and degrading comments about one being ugly, disgusting, a whore, gay etc.:

1. *"can I suck your dick"* (From 12 year old boy's guest book)
2. *"Hey beautiful! What are you doing? I'm just sitting here masturbating."* (From 15 year old girl's guest book)
3. *"fuck you I'll knock the daylight out of you if you look at my profile!"* (From 14 year old boy's guest book)
4. *"Can I have your phone number"* (From 17 year old girl's guest book)
5. *"Hey good-looking do you want to chat dirty?"* (From 15 year old girl's guest book)

[Examples of answers to the question *"Give an example of a message you have received that you did not like"*.]

As mentioned, the examples with negative messages from the respondents' profiles are somewhat different and there is not the same agreement among the respondents about what constitutes an unpleasant message. Apart from the examples above, some also state that they do not like messages from random users saying "Just popped by" or "What are you doing" or so-called "spam-messages", where a user has sent the same message to a lot of people at the same time.

In 70,1 % of the cases the unpleasant message comes from a person unfamiliar to the user. In only 2,8% of the cases the message is written by a best friend and in 1,3% of the cases by a girl- or boyfriend. In 25,9 % by someone else familiar to the user. In this way, the messages which the users find most unpleasant are most often sent by someone they do not know. This is an interesting point, especially in relation to previous surveys that have shown that online bullying among schoolchildren is a big problem on social network sites (e.g. Rasmussen and Hansen, 2005). However, the answers from this survey seem to suggest that bullying from class- or schoolmates is not considered a big problem among the users of social network sites. Rather, most negative experiences are connected to URL-people (people they do not know In Real Life), which could be explained by the fact that young people do not necessarily see bullying on social network sites as separated from everyday life, but part of a local conflict in school (Rasmussen and Hansen, 2005).

All in all, the results from the questionnaire show that there is a big difference as to who is the source of the good and the bad online experiences that the young people have on social network sites. Generally, the good experiences are associated with best friends and boyfriends or girlfriends, whereas bad experiences most often come from being contacted by strangers.

“Please don’t just focus on the bad stuff”

When filling out the questionnaire many of the respondents meta-communicated about their responses. Often, they directly addressed us (me and the Danish Media Council for Children and Young People) as senders of the questionnaire and as adults, commenting on our questions or on their own answers making sure that we understood their statements in the right way. For example this 15 year old boy addressed us when answering the question dealing with unpleasant online experiences:

“(I do not understand unpleasant experiences the same way you do. We sit in front a screen – who needs to turn it off, if someone sits on the other side (MCL: of the screen) acting up or trying to threaten you?) – So no, I have not (MCL: had unpleasant experiences).”

Equally, this 16 year old girl felt the need to “set the record straight” when answering the question “Give an example of a message you have received that you did not like. (If you do not have any example move on to the next page.)”, as she wrote:

“Well, the fact is that if you are not old enough to know that there are unpleasant people around, then you are not even old enough to use cyberspace. Now I want to say something to you that I hope you read – Don’t you think it is better to receive an unpleasant message OVER THE INTERNET rather than meeting an unpleasant man, when you are waiting for the bus?”

Many similar responses can be found throughout the survey. Here, we see how the respondents seem to have an idea about how we as grown ups will interpret their statements. This has to do with their historical body and the fact that they have previously experienced how adults have (over)interpreted stories they have heard about young people’s online encounters. Throughout the questionnaire it becomes clear that many of the respondents really want to explain how social network sites are just part of their everyday life (in which bad experiences are inevitable). Occasional unpleasant experiences are just part of being online, and many of the respondents draw

attention to the fact that they do not care about the unpleasant messages, that they delete them immediately or simply block the sender. Clearly, their answers show that their online experiences are mostly positive and that they are sick of hearing otherwise.

As mentioned earlier, some of the respondents also used the “further comment” box to have ‘a final say’ in the questionnaire. A total of 336 respondents used the option of writing a “further comment”. A small handful of them were, as expected with teenagers as respondents, frivolous saying e.g. “Big tits” or “This sucks”, but most of the comments were serious dealing with the subject of the questionnaire or the questionnaire itself asking us to not only focus on “the bad stuff” or thanking us for listening to them. The following are some of the most common comments:

1. *“And please do not just take all the bad examples and make a big deal out of them...I’ll bet you there are more positive than negative...”* (Boy, 15 years old)
2. *“Thank you...it is nice that there is someone who bothers to listen to us..(:)”* (Girl, 14 years old)
3. *“Even though the advice you give young people and especially young people’s parents are somewhat sensible, a lot of it also scare parents and children more than it guide them. The internet is not just a playground with evil children. If you use your head and KNOW something about how computers work, it is very difficult to get bad experiences. Especially with the current technological development; you can no longer cheat people by creating a profile named “HotGirl14” - 1) It is difficult to get into contact with other people, without one or several pictures of yourself. 2) We can tell the difference between Paris Hilton and HorGirl14 (otherwise you are not that smart :s). 3) No one can fake a voice (54 year old paedophiles do NOT sound as 14 year old girls or boys!!). 4) If some psycho WANTS to find out where you live, then he will! Even if you have no personal information on your profile “* (Boy, 17 years old)
4. *“Do not punish arto.dk, it is the girls’ own fault that they meet up with “old men”, I would never do that.”* (Girl, 12 years old)
5. *“People have too many prejudices concerning the internet: How hard can it be to just shut down the window?”* (Girl, 14 years old)
6. *“I just want to say that I think this survey has been good compared to many others, as you are given the opportunity to formulate your own answers and elaborate on them, instead of just selecting between predefined categories. Besides that, I think that the media often have a tendency to focus way too much on the negative stuff about the internet. It seems as if the internet and especially arto.dk just HAVE to be turned into something dangerous. They totally forget to count in all the positive things, and compare it with all the bad stuff that normally also occur outside the*

internet, and which have always occurred. In my opinion they have a totally wrong approach, and they cover it waaaay too subjective.” (Boy, 16 years old)

7. *“There are many people who believe that young people act without thinking when there are online, and that they write with one pervert after the other, but some of us just use the internet to write with the people we already know, and we are careful.” (Girl, 14 years old)*
8. *“Understand that the Internet is the future. The Internet is full of possibilities for young people - I did not learn to spell and read in school, I learned that when I started using the Internet. I had a lot of trouble in fourth grade and then I started using a chat portal named Netstationen (www.n.dk), I got some friends and in this way I learnt to write and spell, and today I get a least an A in Dictation.” (Boy, 16 years old)*
9. *“I think it is nice that questionnaires concerning use of internet are being sent out, because I think that adults/parents often ‘label’ young people as irresponsible etc....” (Girl, 17 years old)*
10. *“Nice that someone is asking us what’s going on :)” (Girl, 16 years old)*

[Examples of answers to the question “If you have any further comments, you can write them here”.]

It is interesting to see how some of the respondents are really grateful that someone is (finally) listening to *them*. Also, some of the respondents appreciate the open-ended questions where they could write down their own experiences and views on online behaviour.

When looking at all the different statements, the respondents’ “further comments” can generally be divided into four categories:

- Comments on the questionnaire itself (like in example 1, 6 and 9).
- Comments with appreciation and thanks for being heard (like in example 2 and 10).
- Comments on the misguided conception that the internet or social network sites (especially Arto) are dangerous (like in example 3, 5 and 8).
- Comments on adults or the media’s way of understanding young people’s online behaviour (like in example 4, 6, 7, and 9).

This paints a picture of a group of young people wanting to being taken seriously. Even though they are not adults, they do not want to be perceived as small children who do not know how to behave properly online or act “*without thinking*”, as the girl in example 7 points out. On the other hand, they want to be seen as experienced internet users and responsible young people.

Relating to global discourses

As mentioned earlier, the online survey confirmed what other studies (e.g. Larsen, 2005; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield, 2006; boyd, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007) have already shown; that online social networking is often used by youth to sustain existing, offline relationships. What is interesting is, however, that this point is stressed by some of the respondents in the questionnaire (e.g. in example 7) in order to distance themselves from this cultural hegemony or public discourse saying that young people are irresponsible and that social network sites are (solely) dangerous. Here, we see how the young respondents are refereeing to different public discourses, when talking about their concrete local experiences. The questionnaire did not include any open-ended questions about what the respondents think about what their parents or other adults think about their use of social network sites, or how they perceive the media coverage, but, as their further comments showed, they clearly felt the need to express their views on this. And in doing so, they are referring to many different global discourses, which are actually based on more local discourses to begin with. Clearly, the respondents are very aware of the public debate and the moral panic concerning their use of social network sites – and their statements reflect that they are sick of hearing about this and being mentioned in the media without being asked their opinion. Throughout the survey and especially in these last comments we see a group of young people constructing themselves as ‘responsible young people’ wanted to being taken seriously.

Concluding remarks

As the analysis has demonstrated young people are generally very reflective when it comes to their use of social network sites. They are happy – and even grateful – to be able to tell adults about their experiences. In this specific case, the young people especially liked the fact that they themselves could formulate their answers and talk about their own local online experiences. As the paper showed, those experiences are generally positive, and as some of the respondents directly stressed, they are connected to their everyday life and offline friends.

When explaining about the negative experiences, the paper demonstrated how the ‘global’ media discourse helped the respondents to distance the threats, sexual comments etc. from their person to ‘something that goes on in cyberspace’, that is, to interpret them at a more general level. On the other hand, the positive – and local – experiences were perceived as something that is very much connected to Real Life and to them as individuals.

Thus, the majority of the experiences of young people on social network sites do not add up with the picture painted in the public debate and the news media. Often, the glimpses of 'youth online' that we get from reading, viewing or listening to news stories from the media are abstracted away from Real Life and the local experiences that actually take place online. Therefore, as a society we should be careful not to focus only on the global discourses, those being the dangers and downsides of online social networking, as this one-sided focus actually leaves young people feeling alienated and not taken seriously as members of society.

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